



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Estonia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall dialogue and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 17,666 square miles and a population of 1.35 million (68 percent ethnic Estonian, 26 percent Russian, 2 percent Ukrainian, 1 percent Belarusian, and 1 percent Finnish). The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) was the largest denomination, with 165 congregations and approximately 170,000 members. The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC) had 59 congregations with approximately 18,000 members and the Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), had 30 congregations with approximately 150,000 members. There were smaller communities of Baptists, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Old Believers, Methodists, and other denominations. There was a small Jewish community with 2,500 members, with one synagogue in operation. There were also communities of Muslims, Buddhists, and many other denominations and faiths; however, each of these religious groups had fewer than 6,000 adherents.

Fifty years of Soviet occupation diminished the role of religion in society. Many neighborhoods built since World War II do not have religious centers, and many of the surviving churches require extensive renovations. The renovation of two churches--St. John's Lutheran Church in Tartu and St. Simeon's and St. Anne's Orthodox Church in Tallinn--were completed during the reporting period. St. John's church, which had been in ruins since 1944, was inaugurated in December 2004. Church attendance, which had seen a surge coinciding with the independence movement in the early 1990s, now has decreased significantly.

Many groups have sent foreign missionaries into the country in recent years; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) had the largest number of missionaries.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full, and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution states that there is no state church.

There are other laws and regulations that directly or indirectly regulate individual and collective freedom of religion. The activities of religious associations are regulated by the Churches and Congregations Act and the Non-Profit Associations and Unions Act. The statutes of churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are registered at the City Courts. The Churches and Congregations Act decrees that the commanding officer of each military unit shall guarantee conscripts the opportunity to practice their religion. Military chaplain services extend to service members of all faiths. The Churches and Congregations Act decrees that prison directors shall ensure inmates the

opportunity to practice their religion. Conscripts and prisoners exercised this right in practice. Chaplains are prepared by the Theological Seminary of the Methodist Church and appointed by the Council of Churches. A church, congregation and association of congregations must have management boards. A person who is a citizen or who has the right to vote in local government elections may be a member of the management board. In order to formally register a religious association with the City Court, the management board of the religious association submits an application which is signed by all members of the management board. A congregation must have at least 12 adult members. The minutes of the constitutive meeting, a copy of statutes, and a notarized copy of signatures of the members of the management board serve as supporting documents to the registration application.

A program of basic ecumenical religious instruction was available in public schools. A school is under obligation to offer religious studies at the primary or secondary level if at least 15 students request it. Comparative religious studies were available in public and private schools on an elective basis. There were no official statistics on how many students participated in these classes. There were two private church schools in Tartu that had a religious-based curriculum.

The Government took steps to promote anti-bias and tolerance education, including continued work by the International Commission for Investigation of Crimes against Humanity on issues related to the German and Soviet occupations of the country. The Government continued to observe the annual Holocaust Remembrance Day. In December, the country was accepted as a liaison member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. A Holocaust education seminar for schoolteachers took place in August 2004, in cooperation with a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) and Sweden's Living History Forum and co-financed by the Ministry of Education.

The property restitution process, by which religious properties were transferred from the state back to religious associations, was carried out under the Principles of Ownership Reform Act that was passed 13 June 1991. The process has largely been completed. By the end of the period covered by this report, most Orthodox Church properties, including those being used by the EOCMP, were under the legal control of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAO). However, despite continued political progress, differences over the practical disposition of Orthodox Church property continued between the EAO and the EOCMP. There were no transfers of property during the period covered by this report.

According to local Jewish leaders, property restitution was not an issue for the community, as most prewar religious buildings were rented, not owned.

Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas, and Pentecost are national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There was no persecution targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the various religious communities were generally amicable. Although the majority of citizens were nominally Lutheran, ecumenical services during national days, Christian holidays, or at public events were common.

Most of the religious adherents among the country's Russian-speaking population are Orthodox, while the Estonian majority is mostly Lutheran. There is a deep-seated tradition of tolerance of other denominations and religions.

Three graveyards were vandalized during the period covered by this report. In July 2004, vandals broke eight granite crosses and damaged several others in a German war cemetery in Tallinn. In March 2005, a vandal knocked down three tombstones and damaged one in a Johvi cemetery. In May 2005, two vandals knocked down

39 stone crosses in a German War cemetery in Narva. Authorities initiated misdemeanor proceedings in all cases. Earlier thefts of church property prompted the Estonian Council of Churches and the Board of Antiquities to initiate a database of items under protection. The database, which comprises of digital photos and detailed descriptions, is shared as needed with law enforcement agencies.

In 2003, three skinheads were sentenced to conditional imprisonment for activities that publicly incited hatred on the basis of national origin or race. They were convicted for having drawn swastikas and written anti-Semitic inscriptions on buildings in a north-eastern small town. In June 2005, a person was found guilty by a district court for writing an essay that publicly incited social hatred on the basis of national origin, race, or religion. In his essay, he called for destroying all Christians, and Jews, and all churches. A court case regarding anti-Semitic comments made by a person over the Internet was pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discussed religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall policy to promote human rights. Officials of the U.S. Embassy met regularly with appropriate government agencies, NGOs, and a wide range of figures in religious circles. During the period covered by this report, U.S. Embassy officials continued to engage the Government and nongovernmental actors to promote dialogue and education on Holocaust issues in the country.

The U.S. Government funded the following projects: a 2-day seminar and a 1-day conference to study and debate the topic, "What has the science of religion to give to a modern student?"; translation of Benjamin Anolik's account of his wartime experiences as a detainee in a Nazi camp in the country "Missia pamjati" into Estonian; and a travel grant to history teachers to attend a teacher training program at the Holocaust Resource Center at Keene State College and at the Holocaust Museum.

Released on November 8, 2005

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51550.htm)